

GAELIC RELIGIOUS POETRY, 1650-1850

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IN France and Scotland, and to a lesser extent in England, the psalms, in their new and often homely enough metrical dress, made a powerful contribution to the spread of the Reformed doctrines. Multitudes made the delighted discovery that the thoughts and words of the Psalmist fitly and sufficiently expressed their profoundest spiritual longings. This national passion for the Psalms explains the extremely small amount of original religious poetry produced in Scotland in either English or Scots during the 16th and 17th centuries. The ban on the use of other than strictly Scriptural material in Church praise deflected the minds of such poets as there may have been from attempting hymns suitable for public worship. In Gaelic Scotland, on the other hand, the three centuries after the Reformation witnessed the continuation, rather than the rise and development, of a school of religious poets which may well claim St. Columba as its father and patron. At the Synod of Drumcett (674 A.D.) Columcille successfully defended the order of the bards from the imminent threat of proscription; and, as if in gratitude, the Gaelic Highlands have never lacked sacred bards who proclaimed the Christ to whose service Columcille devoted his life. These poets made a contribution to the evangelisation and Christian edification of the Highland people which we, concerned with the spiritual history of our land, ought not to forget.

For the purposes of my survey I have largely confined myself to two centuries: the two centuries that were decisive in shaping the religious map of the Highlands. I have first of all, though it is perhaps scarcely necessary, to explain how, amongst a people that was overwhelmingly non-literate, religious poetry became a factor of prime historical significance. The people, though unused to books, were passionately fond of verse. They had amazingly tenacious memories. New verse, secular or sacred, was published to the people at their social gatherings. "The shieling in the summer, and the ceilidh in the winter, were the literary societies of that day, and what was produced at the shieling was consumed at the ceilidh, in the mental no less than in the material sphere."¹ For

¹ Gunn, A., *Literary Remains of the Reay Country*.

the 18th century we have numerous witnesses to the popularity of the "dain spioradail." "The songs of the county (Sutherland) had likewise very much to do with the early training of its inhabitants. . . . Through the labours of John MacKay, Mudale, Donald Matheson, Kildonan, and others of lesser fame, the county was richly supplied with Gospel sonnets. The inimitable poems of Dugald Buchanan were richly prized, and many natives of Sutherland, who could not read a primer, could sing these songs by the hour and secular and Ossianic pieces of several hundred lines. . . .¹ Of Kildonan before the Clearances, H. F. Campbell says: "The people of this parish sang themselves into the knowledge of the great doctrine of the Church. To appreciate the influence which Donald Matheson's poetry excited upon the people, it has to be remembered that not until near the close of his life (1782) did the Gaelic version of the New Testament get into general circulation, while the translation of the Old Testament was not completed till many years after his death. The prevailing means in his time of conveying religious instruction were the Psalter and the Catechism. . . . The repetition of Matheson's poems served in many cottages to balance . . . the recitations of the Ossianic tales, or the satirical songs of the Reay country bard."² These sacred songs passed from district to district. For instance, after 1745, men of the Sutherland militia, stationed in Perthshire, imparted the poems of MacKay of Mudale to, among others, Dugald Buchanan, the Rannoch poet.³ Alexander Duff, the famous missionary, carried with him the boyhood memory of Buchanan's own poems to the end of his life.⁴ In certain districts they were sung at prayer meetings. "It is undoubted," says Dr. Thomas MacLachlan, the first editor of the *Dean of Lismore MS*, "that they (Buchanan's poems) have been largely blessed to the edification of the Church of God."⁵ Again, as Buchanan was himself influenced by the poetry of John MacKay of Mudale, so Buchanan's poetry became, from his boyhood days, the abiding inspiration of the most popular, though not the greatest, of the spiritual bards. This was Peter Grant, the Strathspey poet, who said of his master that his name "would be remembered as long as the Gaelic language is spoken."⁶ In a word, the spiritual songs of the sacred bards, though excluded from the public worship of the Church, became, and continued almost up to our time to be, the Gaelic-speaking Highlander's chief devotional commentary on the Gospel.

¹ Mackay, *Memoirs of John MacDonald of Helmsdale*, p. 19.

² *Gaelic Society of Inverness*, Vol. 29, page 140.

³ Rose's *Metrical Reliques*, pp. 109-110.

⁴ *Life of A. Duff*, p. 9.

⁵ *Reminiscences of Life of Dugald Buchanan*, p. 71.

⁶ Peter Grant's *Dain Spioradail*, 21st Ed., Introd. p. 13.

II

The religious poets of the period we are considering owe a considerable debt, usually unacknowledged, to the ancient traditional spiritual poetry of the race. Douglas Hyde's *Religious Songs of Connacht* and Alexander Carmichael's *Carmina Gadelica* (first edition 1899) revealed to the world some of the wealth of the ancient folk-poetry which, almost up to our own day, was the treasured heritage of the Gaelic-speaking peoples. It was this spiritual folk-poetry which helped to preserve a certain continuity with the poetical traditions of the early Celtic Church. In the Highlands, the hymns of *Carmina Gadelica* were the common heritage of the whole population, whether Protestant or Roman Catholic. They were "written down from the recital of men and women throughout the Highlands and Islands of Scotland, from Arran to Caithness, from Perth to St. Kilda."¹ During the long period in which there was no Scottish Gaelic Bible or Psalter, these hymns helped to preserve a knowledge of orthodox Christian doctrine among the people. The modern religious poets could not help but be influenced by them.

The most notable characteristic of these hymns is the profound and pervading sense of the neighbourliness of God. He is trusted to be available in all crises. The whole span of human life, from birth to death, is bathed in the light of a kindly supernaturalism. The grosser and grimmer aspects of the supernatural are not absent, and superstition is never far away, but the doctrine, where explicitly expressed, is always orthodox. Christ, the "refuge of my love," "the Son of Mary of graces," "the Shepherd of the poor," "the Herdsman of might," is believed to be adequate in every contingency, and against every foe, whether physical or spiritual. As in the days of Columcille so now, "my druid is Christ, the Son of God."

A sense of sin, in the evangelical meaning, is sometimes revealed. The old pattern of penitential confession was constructed on the framework of the Seven Deadly Sins. Bishop Carswell, the translator of John Knox's *Liturgy*, is an example of a Protestant Gaelic poet who composed a confession of sin on the old formal model. But here is a confession, older I imagine than Carswell, which thinks of sin as the pollution of the whole nature.

We are guilty and polluted, O God,
In spirit, in heart and in flesh,
In thought, in word and in act,
We are hard in Thy sight in sin.²

¹ *Carmina*, Vol. I, p. xix.

² *Carmina*, I, 23.

It is, however, the story of the incarnation, and to a slightly lesser degree, the resurrection, of Our Lord that calls forth the greater wealth of adoration. A good example of an ancient nativity hymn is :

Child of Glory : The Child of Mary,
Born in the stable : The King of all,
Who came to the wilderness : And in our stead suffered ;
Happy they are counted : Who to Him are near.¹

Compare with it the 19th century hymn, translated by Lachlan MacBean (No. 53 *R. C. Hymnary*) :

Child in the manger : Infant of Mary ;
Outcast and stranger, Lord of all !

The connection is surely not fortuitous.

III

When we come to the poetry of the *Fernaig* MS. we have the advantage of being able to date the writers with at least approximate correctness. This collection was made by Duncan Macrae of Inverinate, who was born about 1640 and survived the Revolution.² Macrae himself is the largest single contributor. A man of high intelligence, and deep religious feeling, he was a fervent Royalist and Episcopalian. Both in literary form and in express didactic intention these poems reveal their close kinship with the later Evangelical "dain spioradail." "They might be described as short sermons in verse, put in this form for the religious instruction of the people."³

A profound sense of the majesty of God as revealed in His Creation is a mark of the Gaelic religious poets of whatever period. Alexander Munro of Durness, the 17th century Evangelical, famous in the Highlands for his Gaelic Scripture paraphrases after the manner of Zachary Boyd, writes :

The wonder of the works of the Lord,
Which He made at the beginning of time :
The might of the Lord written on the face of Creation,
This is an epistle which all may read.⁴

Macrae himself writes :

Glory and praise be to Thee, O God :
Happy are we that Thou art the King
Over heaven above and over earth beneath,
And that every land is Thy footstool.⁵

¹ *Carmina* III, 117.

² *Ed. MacPharlain*, Dundee, n.d.

³ *Gaelic Society of Inverness*, XI, 329.

⁴ *Fernaig*, 39.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 53.

A sense of the evanescence of earthly glory, and of the deceitful quality of earthly prosperity, was deeply impressed on these 17th century writers.

Gille-Bhrìde, the bard, asks :

Where now the strength of Samson,
Or the labours of Hercules likewise,
Where now the might of white-skinned Cu-chulain,
Or of Hector or of Achilles ?

Where now the grace of Absalom,
Or the intellect which was Aristotle's glory,
Where the eloquence of Tullius Cicero,
With its matchless cunning in words ?

O body of flesh fast perishing,
You see the guile of the world,
Think of the misery of your end,
Keep ever the dread vision before you.¹

It is, however, when they deal with the sense of guilt that these poets are most interesting from the point of view of the development of the characteristic Evangelical consciousness. It is often impossible to assert from internal evidence, whether some of these poets were Roman Catholic or Protestant ; traditional mediaeval ways of theological thought and mediaeval religious conventions persist and mingle with what we would regard as unexceptionable Evangelical feelings and expressions. Take for example Duncan Macrae's confession :

To-night I am sunk in sorrow
My body is wretched and foul ;
My heart is stricken with pain,
The death-wound of sin has pierced me.

O Man, Who suffered the agony of the tree
In bitter anguish, through false judgement,
Protect Thou me, Thou Son of God ;
Undertake mightily on my behalf.²

Here Macrae expresses very clearly the Evangelical sense of sin as indwelling corruption. Consider, on the contrary, the *Breisleach* or Rhapsody of Donnachadh Mor.³ After a description of the joys of heaven, he proceeds to make a confession of specific guilty acts, which include, with the doubtful exception of murder, all the sins of which fallen human nature is capable. The pattern used by the poet is the Seven Deadly Sins. Of the Irish "confessions" of a similar class, Father Dineen says : " We must not take such self-accusations too literally ; they imply a pious spirit, but they cover all the ground of the moral law in a stereotyped fashion."⁴

¹ *Fernaig*, 3, 5.

² *Ibid.*, 57.

³ *Ibid.*, 81.

⁴ *Bonaventura*, *Summer*, 1938.

The war of the spirit against the flesh is a characteristic theme of the later Evangelical poets. In the *Fernaig* MS. we discern the familiar accent. MacCulloch of Park says :

Always, by day and night :
I wage a war : hard the strait ;
To my dying day, no hope of truce,
Weightier the burden far than death.¹

More particularly the 18th, but also to a large degree, the 19th century poets made the story of the Passion the theme of their exercises. Alasdair MacMhurchaidh is of their company :

He Who aided our arms,
And was Himself sore wounded in the fight ;
The cause of our tender feeling is :
That His side was pierced by the spear.
They put a crown upon His head ;
Nails firmly through His gentle palm :
To the end that we might be saved from death :
Thy mighty works the cause of our sorrow."²

The later Evangelical poets were intensely pre-occupied with the doctrine of the Last Things. Dugald Buchanan's " Day of Judgment " is by far the greatest poem on that theme in the language. The *Fernaig* poets also were fascinated by the horrors of hell and the bliss of heaven. Donnacha Mor exhausts the resources of his rich vocabulary in describing the glories of heaven. Only in the passing does he refer to hell, the place created for the " despisers of the beloved Son of Great Mary."³ To MacCulloch of Park, Duncan Macrae and others, the place of punishment is " cold hell where there will be cold and heat."⁴ In his fine poem on the " Judgment " Duncan Macrae follows the pattern of Christ's parable and the criterion of acquittal or condemnation is the dominical " Inasmuch as ye did it or did it not unto the least of these my brethren." This is how he attempts to limn the heavenly glory :

Bliss that the eye hath not seen,
Bliss that the ear hath not heard,
Bliss that will never forsake
Those who receive it as reward.
Joyful to stand before the Judge ;
Joyful His peace-rest and His triumph ;
It is possible for no one to reveal
The measure of bliss in the enduring place.⁵

Another close point of contact with the later Evangelical poets is to be found in the fairly numerous examples of versified Biblical history. Macrae's verse tract on the Fall is a good example. Alexander Munro's verse sermon on the doctrine of Providence is a brief summary of Old

¹ *Fernaig*, 25.

² *Ibid.*, 131.

³ *Ibid.*, 77ff.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 27, 89, etc.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 89, 90.

Testament history. It is interesting to note that he cites the Apocrypha as well.¹

In concluding our notice of the 17th century poets, it is worth while adverting to the controversial political-ecclesiastical verse which, like the pamphlet warfare in the Lowlands and in England, sought to influence the opinions of the people. In the Highlands, the prose pamphlet was out of the question. The poets were the pamphleteers. Charles II recognised the importance of Iain Lom MacDonald's political poetry by bestowing a pension on him as his bard. Prince Charles Edward, a century later, bestowed a commission on Alexander (Mac Mhaighistir Alasdair) MacDonald more, it is to be presumed, for his poetry than for his knowledge of the military art. "He was the Tyrtæus of his army," as John MacKenzie says.² While these secular poets viewed the constitutional struggle as a conflict between loyalty and treason to the rightful dynasty, the more religiously minded mingled concern for the true faith, as they considered it, with their zeal for the Stewarts. Of a similar type of political religious verse current in Ireland in the 16th and 17th century, Dr. Douglas Hyde remarks: "There is no doubt at all but that (these poems) went out widely amongst the people, and that they were very powerful in keeping them steadfast to the path of their fathers."³

The Scottish verse of a similar class, royalist and Episcopalian in tendency, and composed during the Covenanting period and the years following the Revolution of 1688, of which there is a considerable representation in the *Fernaig* MS., has not the deadly effectiveness of the Irish verse. The Episcopalian poets, praying to be preserved "from the nonsense and lies both of Presbyterians and priests,"⁴ are at the disadvantage of fighting on two fronts. But these poets, most of them anonymous, made quite effective play with such points as the murder of King Charles, the unfilial conduct of William and Mary in lending themselves to be tools against their own flesh and blood, the lust of power masquerading in the name of religion, and the disaster to the cause of Christ when disorderly rebels destroy the fair fabric of the Church as the Apostles appointed it. They do not, as far as I can see, use the argument of the Episcopal succession. Yet we would be right in asserting that such verse, circulating among the people, did much to give a religious colouring to the subsequent struggle between dispossessed Episcopacy and ascendent Presbytery. Until the rise of the "Usagers," the doctrinal and ecclesiastical differences between the two systems were so slight and the antipathy between them so intense, that we must assume that the points emphasised by the poets made a strong impression on the hearts of the people.

¹ *Fernaig* 35.

² *Sar Obair*, p. 102, new ed., 1904.

³ *Religious Songs of Connacht*, I, 71.

⁴ *Fernaig*, 251.

IV

The religious bards of the 18th and 19th centuries were representative of all classes of the community. John MacKay of Mudale (born 1690) was a gentleman-tacksman; Dugald Buchanan and many others were schoolmasters. Donald Matheson was one of the many poetical catechists. John Morrison was a blacksmith, John Macrae of Petty was a weaver and illiterate, James MacGregor of Nova Scotia and Peter Grant of Strathspey were ministers, William Gordon, an attractive figure, was a soldier in the Reay Fencibles.

A remarkable feature of Gaelic literature during the 18th century was the almost complete separation between the sacred and the secular. Professor Mackinnon ascribes it to the fact that "almost since the Reformation, and especially since the Revolution, the majority of our prominent religious leaders in the Highlands looked coldly upon our secular literature, and especially proscribed the song and the dance." Consequently "one never finds among us what is common elsewhere, the secular poet attempting a religious composition."¹ Even Rob Donn never attempted a "dan spioradail" or spiritual poem. His beautiful elegy on his minister, Rev. Murdo MacDonald, while giving a gracious picture of the ideal Christian pastor, follows the pattern of the traditional secular elegy, and there is no attempt, as there is always with the professed religious poets, to make his subject a peg for an Evangelical homily. Only one poet, John MacLean (born 1787), of Coll and Pictou, became equally well-known as a secular bard and a religious poet.

In fairness, we ought to appreciate that the "prominent religious leaders" had a certain case. Both before and after the Reformation, Gaelic secular poetry was cultivated to an excessive degree in the departments of panegyric and satire.² The bards were to a considerable extent the fomenters of strife. But probably what moved the leaders of the Church to an even greater degree was the fact that too many of the bards, including even the greatest, were at times given to exercising their craft in the composition of improper songs. The consequence of this rigid separation between the sacred and the secular could have been foreseen. "The Gaelic hymn is less musical and the Gaelic song less chaste because of the wide gulf that separates the sacred and the secular in our Highland life."³

¹ *Glasgow Gaelic Society*, 1908, p. 76.

² Watson, W. J., *Classic Gaelic Poetry of Panegyric*, 1908.

³ Mackinnon, D., *Glasgow Gaelic Society*, 1908, p. 75.

The form which the religious poet gave to the "dan spioradail," or spiritual song, was determined by its intended function. Except in Argyll and the southern Highlands, where the Paraphrases gained a certain popularity, due to the influence of the Haldane missionary campaigns (after 1793), the Psalms alone were used for public worship. This fact debarred the poets from attempting hymns suitable for congregational singing. It also explains the comparative rarity of the hymn of objective praise. The poet composed his hymns for the fellowship meeting and the family circle. The heroic ballads and the secular songs were recited or sung by one individual, while the rest listened or perhaps joined in the chorus. In the ballad, and usually also in the song, there was a story. The length did not matter, or rather, the longer the better. The spiritual songs follow this pattern. They were long. They contained narrative mingled with exhortation. They could be sung to some simple tune.

The poetical narrative consisted, as it did in the case of the earlier writers of the *Fernaig* MS., of the story of the Fall, the life and especially the passion of Christ, the last judgment and the fate of the blessed and of the accursed. The systematic exposition of doctrine occupied the energies of bards like Peter Grant and James MacGregor. Many of the spiritual bards, especially those of the Northern Highlands, gave a considerable place to spiritual self-analysis. Donald Macrae, the weaver of Petty, and John Morrison, the smith of Harris, were renowned as anatomists of the soul.

The dialectical poem, once common in Ireland and Scotland, was not widely cultivated by the 18th century spiritual bards. But they extended the scope of the "marbhrann" or elegy much beyond its traditional limit. The spiritual elegy does express personal bereavement, but the edifying homily forms the bulk of the poem. Most of the Evangelical bards attempted the elegy, and the northern Separatists of the late 18th and early 19th century made it their chosen medium. Duncan Lothian tried to versify the Protestant-Popish controversy, after the example of the 17th century propagandists. Lachlan MacLachlan and William MacKenzie inveighed vigorously against moral faults, the Moderates, and the evils of patronage.

V

The Evangelical poets of the eighteenth century and later fall into three natural groupings. The southern poets of Argyll and Perthshire, the poets of the northern Highlands, and the spiritual bards who, to a greater or less extent, were influenced by the Haldane movement, show certain distinctive characteristics.

The earliest of the eighteenth century Argyllshire bards was David Mackellar, the blind poet of Glendaruel. The great poem which made him famous consists of 33 four-line stanzas, and was published in Glasgow in 1752. He begins with a doxology :

Praise be to Him of highest glory
To God exalted over all ;
Meet it is to render homage
To the Creator of all worlds.

With a verbal economy uncommon in Gaelic poetry, and with an amazing sense of proportion, he describes the Creation, the Fall, the Incarnation, the Passion, the Resurrection and Ascension of our Lord, concluding with the Last Judgment and the condition of the redeemed and the lost. John MacKenzie, the editor of *Sar Obair*, says that "it was so very popular in the Highlands that many persons got it by heart that had never seen the printed copy."¹ This is how he speaks of the Passion:

He was hung on the tree so high,
The spear thrust pierced His side ;
They placed the bitter crown on His head ;
His foes have wounded the Son of God.

In place of kingly crown, a crown of thorns,
Mark of scorn and great contempt
Gall and bitter wine,
This it was they made Him drink.

The nails are hammered
Into the palms of His hands,
His heart-blood streams from His side,
Merchandise dearer than gold.

The Christ of Highland Evangelicalism was no theological lay figure.

Seventeen of the hymns of John Campbell of Glassary are given in the *Kennedy* collection of 1786. The evangelical history and the Lord's Supper are his two great themes. Here are three typical verses on his favourite theme :

In lowly state He came,
He knew not where to lay His head ;
But folk of treachery pursued Him daily,
And He without guilt or stain.

The night on which He was betrayed,
He took the bread in His right hand ;
He gave to His disciples around,
With joy He gave to them to eat.

After which He took the cup,
Freely He gave them wine to drink ;
He will have neither want nor lack
Who follows in His footsteps.¹

¹ *Kennedy*, 17.

The reverent simplicity of the words suggests that the writer found the theme too august for eloquence.

In Argyll the proportion of communicants to the whole congregation was much larger than in Ross or Sutherland. But notice Campbell's attitude to careless communicating :

He has appointed His Supper to be shared
By all on whom He has set His love ;
But never a crumb to be given
To any that are unworthy of it.

A far journey and bitter banishment
Will be the portion of every soul
Who comes with presumptuous purpose
Without preparation to the Table.¹

The sacramental Sabbath is the " day of festival."

On the question of the salvation of infants, Campbell is on the side of charity.

Their souls will go with their Saviour,
Like fair white doves ;
Lightly they will fly,
Under the warmth of His wing they will rest.²

He is deeply conscious of the sombre majesty of death.

Death is the King of Terrors
If timely heed be not given him ;
Like a thief he comes without warning,
He takes the valiant man with him.
The hardy hero who has seen many a battle
The strong champion who shrinks not from blood ;
However great his might with weapons,
Death will inherit his best loved treasure.³

But the death of the believer is happy :

Joyous to the believer is death,
Coming from Christ in love and grace.⁴

Five of the *Kennedy* hymns are credited to a " certain gentlewoman." In hymn 19, she follows the familiar pattern of the story of the Fall and the Redemption. In the others, she is pre-occupied with her own spiritual condition. Along with this, there is the assured confidence that the Good Physician is competent to deal with her hurts :

Praise to the Healer Who sees my wounding,
All my ease is in Thy hands ;
O ! Thou Who cast the secret arrows,
Come with hyssop, I shall be whole.
Thou art the Healer Who comes when called for ;
Thou demandest no recompense save our love ;
Glory and praise let us give with obedience,
Take strict heed to the first command.⁵

¹ *Kennedy*, 17.

² *Ibid.*, 38.

³ *Ibid.*, 64.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 64.

⁵ *Ibid.*, II, Hy. XX.

In another poem, the writer discovers the love of God in the sunlight and in the sprouting breard, in the green grass and in the leaves of the trees. The tempest lulled into peace by God's hand, the birds clothed with His care, the ebbing and flowing of the sea, the rainbow in the sky are tokens of His love.¹

Iain Mac an Leora's "dain," with their appeal to the evangelic motive and their abrupt moral precepts, show an acquaintance with an older tradition of spiritual verse.

The agony of the King on the tree,
And the nails firmly hammered in,
These things remember through thy days,
Till the clay is placed on thy breast.
Like a sentry keep watch over death,
Heed not to care for thy person ;
Be chary of friendship with gluttony,
Lest thy cause be betrayed by lust.²

"Laoidh MhicCithich" (*Keith's Hymn*) betrays a grim consciousness of the conflict of the spirit against the unruly body, the fountain of evil. His enumeration of particular sins, pride, drunkenness, envy, covetousness, neglect of Bible study, is in the manner of Bishop Carswell, and earlier poets, but he strikes the essential Evangelical note :

My heart this night is sore,
Alas ! that it should be so ;
My heart is hard as a stone,
No thaw or warmth or love.
Thyself, break Thou the stone,
Since Thou art mighty of hand,
That from it may freely flow,
Repentance for my condition.³

We note the common use of one of the best beloved of the names of Christ.

He was gently happed in the grave,
The Hero, and hard was the fate.

The great figure of Dugald Buchanan (1716-1768) towers above his fellow-craftsmen in preceding and subsequent ages. In the judgment of Dr. Douglas Hyde, the famous Irish scholar, he was "the best religious poet who ever arose in Alba."⁴ By Alba, he means Anglo-Saxon as well as Gaelic Scotland. Professor Magnus MacLean, a less detached critic perhaps, says : "No Gaelic book was printed so frequently as these (Buchanan's) poems, and no book (outside the Bible and the Catechism) has exercised such a profound influence upon all classes of Gaelic-speaking Highlanders."⁵

¹ *Kennedy*, II, 105.

² *Ibid.*, II, 111.

³ *Ibid.*, II, 115.

⁴ *Religious Songs of Connacht*, I, 39.

⁵ *Literature of the Highlands*, 2nd Ed., 114.

His poem, *Morachd Dhe*, proclaims the ineffable majesty of God. Several of the Gaelic poets, of varying types of theological thought, have seen in Nature a revelation of the love and providence of God. Buchanan dwells rather on the immeasurable distance between the Creator and the creature, and on the littleness of the universe in the presence of its Lord.

"Though the sun be dissolved into nothing,
And all within its circle of light,
As little were it missed from Thy universe
As the ocean would miss a finger-drop."

Fulangas Chriosd, or the Passion of Christ, a traditional theme with Gaelic religious poets, is the story of the Gospel ministry narrated with a simple and powerful pathos. This is his interpretation of the cup of agony which the Saviour drank in the Garden of Gethsemane.

All the pains that from the beginning
Men have borne, and to the limit of eternity shall bear,
These were all placed together,
In the cup which He drank in their room.

The Saviour's sufferings on the Cross are realised with tremendous power. The climax of that suffering is when: "the fierce flood of God's wrath is emptied upon Him, from every side round about." The measure of that wrath is such that the smallest portion of what Christ endured would have sufficed to destroy the universe. The poet, following the ancient tradition of the Gaelic secular "marbhrann" or elegy, envisages the sympathetic sorrow of all nature in the Saviour's sufferings.¹

La a Bhreitheanais, *The Day of Judgment*, has been described as the greatest of Buchanan's poems.² Its chief interest for us lies in the evidence which it provides as to Buchanan's conception of what wins the favour or incurs the wrath of the Judge. Highland religion, especially Highland Evangelicalism, has been blamed for excessive subjectivism. This charge is not true against Buchanan. The following appreciation is just. "Buchanan never allows that any fulness of inward life can dispense with the duties of everyday life, with mercy, truth, industry, generosity, self-control. The unworthy man who is excluded from the kingdom is not the man of blunt, homely feeling, incapable of ecstatic rapture and exalted emotion, but the man who locks up for himself the gold God gave him for the general good, who shuts his ear to the cry of the poor, who entrenches his heart behind a cold inhumanity, who permits the naked to shiver unclothed, who lessens not his increasing flock by a single kid to satisfy the orphan's wants."³

¹ *MacLean's ed.*, p. 8f.

² MacLean, D., *Literature of the Highlands*, 119.

³ *Gaelic Society of Inverness*, III, 105.

In his noble poem, *An Gaisgeach, The Hero*, Buchanan endeavours to give to his fellowcountrymen a higher conception of courage than that taught by the secular bards. To the latter, the warrior was the true hero ; but Buchanan asserts :

It is not bravery to mangle men ;
It is not fame to be in combat oft ;
Barbaric pride is not nobility of soul ;
True valour is not fierceness without ruth.

But hero true is he who wins,
O'er fears of life and dread of death ;
Who meets with an undaunted breast
The share that Destiny upon him thrusts.

For us, the chief significance of the poem called *An Claiheann, The Skull*, lies in the fact that it is, among other things, the greatest moral and sociological tract produced in the Highlands during the 18th century. The Rising of 1745 and its aftermath precipitated the dissolution of the ancient order in the social and economic life. Buchanan was not a professed economist. But he was convinced that the moral law had an authority higher than the law of economic improvement, which was part of the thought of the age and to which Adam Smith was soon to give classic expression in his *Wealth of Nations*. In the poem, its form doubtless suggested by the churchyard scene in Hamlet, we meet the lawyer who could be bought and sold, the judge who weighs truly and decides justly ; the physician battling with death, who himself at least has to yield to death ; the soldier, sending others to be food for worms, becoming, despite sword and armour, food for worms ; the drunkard descending lower than the beasts that perish ; the temperate man who disciplines his passions. Here is the true landlord, the father of his people, pitiful to the poor, clothing the naked, giving according to the measure of his means. Here, too, is the rackrenting laird, who flays his people, and thins the cheeks of his tenants by excessive exactions. Let there be delay in payment, he seizes the cattle, though the poor cry for respite. In his presence, thin locks uncovered in the bitter wind, stands an old man presenting his unheeded petition. Let death be praised, who strikes the tyrant low, so that his former slave comes now without obeisance into his presence. In his reference to the Church, Buchanan, a loyal son of the Church, honours the true pastor of God's flock, while he holds up the hireling, solicitous of the fleece, but forgetful of the flock, to contempt. Afterwards, such strictures became the stock-in-trade of anti-Moderate and Separatist versifiers, but with him, they have still in them the living breath of prophecy.

VI

THE NORTHERN POETS.

John MacKay of Mudale, in Farr, was born about 1690, and is described as "a poet, scholar, and gentleman, and an eminently pious man." His poems were written down from oral tradition. His most famous "dan," *An Tearnadh Miorbhuileach, The Wonderful Redemption*, is said to have been composed during a harvest night while contemplating the glories of the heavens. In this, he narrates the story of Redemption against the background of creation and history, and follows a pattern whose perfect exemplar is MacKellar's hymn already noticed. The authentic note of evangelical passion pulses through his not always perfectly polished verse.

He promised them the heart of flesh
To wound the heart of stone ;
And guilt that red as scarlet flared
Should white be made as wool.
Their vile transgressions blotted out
By the virtues of the Lamb's death,
Even though more in number in the counting
Than the white sands of the shore.¹

In *Cairdeas na Trianaid, The Friendship of the Trinity*, he tells the story of the Flood, and emphasises the promise of the rainbow. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Aaron are the children of the rainbow. The Captivity and Exodus are symbolical of sin and redemption. He then proclaims the Gospel remedy for sin, stressing the argument from prophecy. *Adhamh agus Eubha, Adam and Eve*, seems to be improperly so called. The poet begins with our first parents, but covers the whole field of sacred history and Christian doctrine.² He is emphatic that in faith alone is saving efficacy. "Let us turn our backs on self-opinion ; already it has cost us too dear. Though a man should be the most righteous under the sun ; though his mind should be illumined by all knowledge ; though he wear out his knees in continuous prayer ; yet he will merit little at the hands of God if he have not firm faith in His mercy."³

According to the biographical notice prefixed to his hymns, Donald Matheson was born in 1719 and died in 1782. His productive period was from 1745 to the time of his death. His home was in Kildonan in Sutherland. He had the distinction of inspiring a well-marked school of religious versifiers, who made an impression on Sutherland and Caithness. In this poet, introspective analysis and interest in spiritual experience have overcome the traditional love of narrative and direct doctrinal teaching. Though caring too little for craftsmanship, he has undoubted vigour and forcefulness.

¹ Rose's *Metrical Reliques*, p. 110.

² *Ibid.*, 116.

³ *Ibid.*, 120.

He thus views his own condition :

A heart without faith, full of graceless profession
That clings to a shadow for proof of salvation ;
A heart that is fleshy, that will not win homeward
And that looks to the world as an idol to lust for.¹

His self-loathing forces him to the mercy-seat :

When I look on myself, foul rag that I am,
What I see casts me prostrate before Thy throne.
At the throne of Thy mercy, there is joy to be found.

Only the twice-born are capable of holiness. Further, only the twice-born can be truly happy.

Matheson taught a firm trust in God's providential dealings. When he was evicted and homeless, others pitied his case : " Onlookers and friends see a crook (wound) in my lot ; but all the while I am like a bark that sails, the sea beneath bearing me up." At the same time, he is deeply sensitive to the penury and oppression which is the lot of others : " The earth is full of poverty : O God, who shall be able to bear it ? " Yet the earth belongs to the Lord's people. Though they should go to Carolina, or any other land on earth, they are still in their own country. The emigrations then taking place from the Highlands are a fulfilment of Scripture. Through them, the lonely places shall be inhabited, and the desert shall blossom. Evicting landlords are bitter scourges that chastise men for their ultimate benefit.²

Lachlan MacLachlan, born near Inverness in 1729, became a S.P.C.K. teacher about 1745, and was eventually chosen for the difficult post at Abriachan, then a nest of smugglers. Like Matheson and many others, he uses the elegy as a weapon of assault against the defections of the age. He is especially severe on cardplaying, then very common in the Highlands. He was a keen anti-Moderate, and a friend of Evangelical lights such as Hector MacPhail, James Calder, and Fraser of Kirkhill. In his elegy on MacPhail, he says that the death of godly ministers is a sign that God is angry with the land. The true foster-fathers in Christ are few. The majority of ministers, like the sons of Eli, disgust the people with divine ordinances. Elders and " professors " given to swearing are like the foxes that gnaw the vine. Patronage is oppression, but Patronage will go, and the sorrow of the godly will be turned to praise. He inveighs vigorously against the rich who " flay the faces of the poor."³

William MacKenzie, teacher at Leys, was born near Inverness in 1748. He taught school at Leys for 40 years. He was a strong non-intrusionist.

¹ Rose's *Metrical Reliques*, 251.

² *Ibid.*, 260, 261, 271.

³ *Ibid.*, 99.

He died in 1838 at the age of 90. In his *Ar Ceud Sinnseara, Our First Parents*, a brief account of Adam and Eve is followed by an analysis of sin in its universal pervasiveness. This, again, is the background for an exposition of the glories of the divine grace. In the "cath fuilteach," "bloody battle," on Calvary, the wrath of the Father overwhelms the Son, but now that the veil of the Temple is rent, the gracious invitation is extended, "Come unto me."¹

Perhaps more interesting is his *Carthannachd* or *Hymn to Charity*. In the first part he follows close to I Corinthians xiii, but in the latter part he deals faithfully with symptoms which indicate the lack of charity. In the market (presumably in Inverness) one may hear, he informs us, lies and foul oaths. One will meet greed and trickery. Raffish and blasphemous talk, drunkenness and backbiting are common. And, most hateful of sights, one may see "professors" of religion sitting without shame at table with sinners such as these.²

In his *A Chubaid, The Pulpit*, he describes the Gospel minister and his opposite. The former, anointed from on high to sound the trumpet, has been taught in the university of the Spirit, has known the scourging of the "law," and has found refuge from the covenant of works in Christ's victory. The hireling, on the other hand, while proud of his learning, is idle and useless. Often in the company of the gentry, he hears from them blasphemy and idle talk. Cultivating the things of the flesh, he becomes the slave of the flesh.³

Donald Macrae, the blind weaver of Petty, was born in 1756. Macrae was a man of remarkable gifts of mind. He had a genius for spiritual analysis. "Cor an anma," "the condition of the soul," was the theme of his poetry. In his *Gearan* or *Complaint*, he traces the subtle working of sin in his members. "Approaching me in its winding, treacherous way, it sings an enticing lullaby; it tells me its story like an old friend, but I began to know that, behind the lovely form, there was evil inexpressible. Foul and prickly though sin be, yet it tricked me. It prattles to me like a sweetheart; and, most shameful of all, it finds lodging in my own heart." The poet knows that the hidden and forgotten sin is still active for mischief. "The hidden wrong, shame to relate, I buried deep out of my sight. But the dead rose again to life and expelled my confident pride out of doors."⁴

The true believer possesses a latent faith, which comes to his help in need. "Faith without un-faith needs not to reck or fear; it may even slumber peacefully as long as it cares. But when a stout siege is laid to

¹ Rose's *Metrical Reliques*, 9f. ² *Ibid.*, 18. ³ *Ibid.*, 25 ⁴ *Ibid.*, 166.

the city, the sleeping hidden faith rises to join in the battle.”¹ Macrae was intensely interested in the vagaries of the imagination. “Like shuttle weaving, so is my soul in my breast; to and fro in its runway, like a bird in its flying, that never seeks rest.”² In his poem, *An Intinn Dhiomhain, The Vain Mind*, he deals in a full and striking manner with this theme.

Mary MacPherson, better known as “Bean Torra Dhamh,” belonged to Laggan, near Kingussie. She was an aged woman in 1803, and was probably born about 1730. Passionately fond of dancing in her youth, she carried her exuberant spirits into her religious life. She wrote sweet, tuneful, flowing verses. She is known to have left thirty poems behind her, of which only seven have survived. She had a capacity for the hymn of adoration. In *Togarrach Bhi Maille ri Criodd, Fain would I be with Christ*, she writes: “He is the Rose of Sharon, the Flower from the root of Jesse. He is the Hero of Judah’s tribe, whose might is exhaustless. It was His peerless loveliness that drew my love to Him above others. Away from His presence, my joy is turned into mourning.”³ The Gospel invitation is put with attractive pathos: “Come in thy blindness, guilt and thralldom; leave on Him thy heavy load. Ask for teaching, ruling, freedom. These He can give thee in abundance.” Though conscious of inward corruption, her chief note is joy: “My soul, awake, and with thy tuneful harp, sing laud and praise to Him. He is the Lord of deeds with strong right arm. He has won the victory for His flock.” She passed her youth in a district where feudal oppression was known, and where the foray was still sometimes resorted to. Her poem, “’S mile marbhphaisg ort, a shaoghail,” contains references to the custom of seizing the heriot horse on the occasion of the death of a tenant, and also to “the gallows and doom on the top of each hillock.”

VII

Because of his expressed concern for the evangelisation, not of his own land alone, but of the whole world, we may class William Gordon, “soldier in MacKay’s Highland Regiment,” otherwise the Reay Fencibles, as belonging to the last section of our Gaelic religious poets, those who were touched, directly or indirectly, by the quickening consciousness, at the end of the 18th century, of the world-mission of the Church. Personal devotion to Jesus is the heart of his religion. The hymn of praise occurs frequently. “Let unceasing praise be uplifted to Him. To the Lamb Who has purchased us, let praise and honour be rendered each day.”

¹ Rose’s *Metrical Reliques*, 196f. ² *Ibid.*, 211.

³ A. Macrae’s ed. of *her poems*, p. 16.

He is deeply impressed by the mingled majesty and lowliness of God. "In might and in humbleness, who is like unto my God? In majesty and in gentleness, He has not His peer." His hope is resting, not on self-salvation, but: "With weak and trampling hand, I laid my hold on Christ. It was not my hold on Him, but His strong grasp on me, that has kept me in safety. My grasp is uneasy, surely I would fail; but Christ's hold on me is strong and constant."¹ But his personal salvation is not his chief concern. He prays for the coming of God's kingdom, when every tongue and tribe shall gather under the banner of Christ. He prays for peace between the nations, with justice and amity at home. "Command war to cease in each land; strengthen peace between man and man. Bind together with cords of love all ranks from king to poor man."² Gordon's verse impresses one with the wealth, fulness, and solidity of the spiritual life which was cultivated among Highland people of humble life and limited education. His poems were published in 1803.

James MacGregor, a native of St. Fillans, Perthshire, and a colonial missionary in Nova Scotia in connection with the Secession Church, was born in 1759. Most of his poems were, he tells us, composed while "travelling through the dreary wilderness of America." He is a competent, accomplished, though occasionally pedestrian poet. His chief purpose is didactic. His poems "are indeed a system of theology." The titles of his doctrinal poems, *Man's State by Nature*, *The Invitation of the Gospel*, *Union with Christ*, *Freedom from the Law*, indicate the nature of their contents. But while we get the Covenant Theology, with special emphasis on the free offer of salvation from most of the other poets, MacGregor sounds a note of a new and aggressive Evangelicalism when he sings of missionary effort overseas: "O God of peace, scatter wide Thy Truth, midst the peoples of the nations, and the islands far away. They are like folk wandering in the mist of the mountains; the night draws near and they are faint and without food." He contrasts the good news which is now everywhere broadcast through the distribution of Bibles with the old tales which the Gael delighted to hear: "Not news of the valiant clans, that would fight, nor yield unto death; nor of Clan Gregor, ignorant but ready of hand; so oft at odds with the law. Nor of Clan Donald, whose joy was the 'Red Hand.' Nor of the Camerons, hardy and heedless. Nor of any other clan, however proud its name. Nor of chief though he be fiercer than his peers. But rather news of the Gospel of Grace, and its spread through each airt around."³

¹ Gordon's *Danta Spioradail*, *Hymns* 105, 62, 41.

² *Ibid.*, *Hy.* 23, 7.

³ MacGregor's *Dain*, Glasgow, 1825, pp. 33, 78, 84.

In his poem, *Air Foghlum nan Gaidheal, The Education of the Gael*, he paints a rather sombre picture of the prevailing ignorance amongst his fellow-countrymen. But the really significant point in this ode is the prevailing spirit of buoyant hopefulness felt by the author as he contemplates the Highland scene. All things were possible; with the key of knowledge in his hand, the Gael would open a door which led straight to an ampler life. The moral and spiritual, no less than the temporal regeneration of the Highlands, would follow in the wake of book-learning. "Of a truth, the time will come upon us foretold by the Scripture prophets." It was a noble illusion; and not wholly illusion either.

John MacLean, a disciple of James MacGregor, was, like his master, a poet of the Highland Dispersion. He was a secular as well as a spiritual bard. His well-known poem, *Am Bard an Canada*, gives a vivid account of the hardships endured by the early settlers. It was after enduring several years of the lot of a pioneering settler in Pictou that his mind turned to the composition of spiritual poetry. Well versed in the Scriptures and in Puritan theology, he became a poet-preacher to his fellow Gaels in the colonies and in the homeland.

In his hymns, MacLean covers most aspects of the federal theology, but his main interests were his personal devotion to Jesus, and the world-mission of the Gospel. In his poem, *Am Fear-Saoraidh, The Saviour*, he dwells on the story of Our Lord's life in the manner traditional to the Highland sacred bards. The birth in Bethlehem, the shepherds, the wise men, the massacre of the innocents, the flight to Egypt, the preaching of the Baptist, the earthly ministry, the betrayal, the scene on Calvary, and a glimpse of the risen and ascended glory are all included in the 24 eight-line stanzas of the poem. In such hymns as *Cuireadh an t-Slanuighear, The Saviour's Call*, and *Saorsa tre Fuil an Uain, Freedom by the Blood of the Lamb*, the hortative and homiletical note predominates, though there are many tender references to various aspects of the Saviour's Passion. Perhaps more interesting is his *Cogadh Naomh* or *Holy War*. The obvious inspiration is John Bunyan; but there is a distinct back-glance at the warlike poetry of the secular bards. After a stirring description of Christ's army, there is the traditional "Brosnachadh Catha" or "Incitement to Battle."

His *Craobh-Sgaoileadh an t-Soisgeil, The Spread of the Gospel*, indicates the growing interest among Evangelicals in the cause of Foreign Missions. When MacLean wrote this poem, the most far-spreading missionary movement since the days of the Apostles was just getting under weigh.¹

¹ *Hymns of John MacLean* (1880).

Peter Grant, born in Strathspey in 1783, has been the most popular of the sacred bards. Reared in the Establishment, he eventually, after a stormy spiritual experience, cast in his lot with the disciples of James and Robert Haldane. He became, indeed, the minstrel of the home missionary movement initiated by the Haldanes, but which shortly swept through the national Church like a great flood. His verse, little of which is sectarian, is sweet, flowing, and firmly knit. His hymns are usually too long, and too obviously didactic, to be suitable, as they stand, for church praise. But Lachlan MacBean, aptest of translators, has given excellent English versions of selected verses.¹ One of these versions, "O Lord, I sing Thy praises," has won a well-deserved place in the Revised Church Hymnary.

Grant dutifully discourses on the various aspects of the confessional theology. His abiding inspiration is, however, the love of Christ.

How blessed Sion's daughter, who leaneth by the way,
Upon her strong Beloved, her never-failing stay;
It is the greatest blessing for which I ever pray
To lean on Jesus' bosom, where John at supper lay.²

(MacBean's tr.)

In his poems on the Last Things, he invites comparison with Buchanan. But, for all the appealing graciousness of many passages, he cannot sustain such comparison. He lacks Buchanan's grave majesty and towering imagination.

But, despite the fact that he never left his native glens, he had a world-outlook which Buchanan's generation, engrossed wholly with home problems, did not possess. As his *Oran nam Misionaraidh* and other pieces prove, he clearly visualises the whole world as the field of evangelistic endeavour.

In his famous *Gearan nan Gaidheal* or *Cry of the Gael* he contrasts past and present in a manner which is natural enough in an agent of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel at Home, and which, indeed, has a large element of historical truth; it is, nevertheless, too highly coloured.

With minds in error, they thought with terror
Of shapes unearthly and dark alarms,
But sought salvation in incantation
In spells unholy and mystic charms.
A people careless, profane and prayerless,
Were like the beasts in the dewy vale;
No Bible reading, no praise or pleading—
Such was the custom among the Gael.³

(MacBean's tr.)

¹ *Songs and Hymns of the Gael.*

² *Ibid.*, p. 42.

³ *Ibid.*, 52.

John MacDonald, the "Apostle of the North," was possibly the greatest Gaelic preacher since Columcille. As a sacred poet, his chosen medium was the elegy. He commemorated certain of the heroes of Highland Evangelicalism, Charles Calder of Ferintosh, John Stewart of Dingwall, John Robertson of Kingussie, and John Kennedy of Redcastle. The most touching of the elegies is that on his own father, the catechist of Reay, Caithness. MacDonald is always forceful, often eloquent, and has occasional flashes of poetical felicity, but, except in the elegy on his father and certain verses in his other pieces, he creates the impression of a powerful preacher who thinks it his duty to write in verse. His elegies contain much edifying Evangelical doctrine, and, on the whole, may be regarded as metrical sermons. MacDonald was a strong party man and his poems contain a fair amount of anti-Moderate propaganda.¹

John Morrison, born in Rodel, Harris, in 1790, known throughout the Highlands as "The Smith of Harris," was a spiritual son of John MacDonald. In 1822, under MacDonald's preaching, he passed through the Evangelical experience of conversion. He owed to his spiritual master the first definite leading to the composition of spiritual songs. Morrison, however, belonged to a far higher poetical category than MacDonald. While he must be ranked below Dugald Buchanan, he was the peer, if not the superior, of Peter Grant.

Like Macrae of Petty, he is a master of soul-analysis. His poem, *The Strife of the Old Man and the Young Man*, though it might be improved by compression, is a sure, delicate, and masterly description of the swaying fortunes of the war within the soul. Like Matheson, he can movingly express, as in *An Ionndrainn*, *The Yearning*, the mingled sense of alienation from God because of indwelling corruption, and the longing for God which will permit him no rest. Like Mary MacPherson and Peter Grant, he can sing of the loveliness of Christ. Nowhere in the language, perhaps, is that theme more memorably dealt with than in *Maise Chrìosd*, *The Beauty of Christ*. He writes with deep feeling about his spiritual warfare, the power of sin, the might and wonder of free grace, the love of the Saviour to those who deny Him, the Lord's Supper as the joyous foretaste of heaven, the glories of heaven and the horrors of hell. A temperance enthusiast, he tellingly inveighs against the evils of drink. Worldly amusements also come under the lash, and, as an ardent disciple of the "Apostle of the North," he took an active part in the ecclesiastical politics of the time.² In the latter role, he freely, though not too successfully, used the weapon of satire.

¹ *Marbhrainn, etc., le Iain Domhnullach*, Edin., 1848.

² *Dain Iain Ghobha*, ed. G. Henderson. 2 vol., Glasgow, 1896.

He was happier in the role of panegyrist. His elegy on Donald Munro, the blind catechist (1773-1830), was his earliest and best-known exercise in that medium. His elegies on Alexander MacLeaod of Ung-na-cille and John MacDonald of Ferintosh are deservedly popular. A fellow-clansman, Neil Morrison, sang the Smith of Harris' own elegy in a poem that deserves to be remembered, less on account of its merits than its theme. Dr. George Henderson, his editor, expressed his own feelings in words which I should like to quote :

The song remains although the song-smith died
Whom sorrow cannot stain nor song embalm.
The voice of mirth, the voice whose higher birth
Left earth less tuneful by his music's power
Makes heav'n more sweet with song of hallowed psalm
And flower of perfect speech ; Faith, Hope, and Love
With Christian minstrelsy did meet
And joy and human tears are off'rings at thy feet."

He was the last of the great spiritual bards.

Note.—The English renderings of the Gaelic poems, except where otherwise stated, are the writer's.

